

Washington Post  
May 24, 2005

## **CAFTA Is a Win-Win**

By Robert B. Zoellick

Henry Stimson is best known as Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretary of war, but nearly 80 years ago Col. Stimson played a pivotal, less-remembered role in Central America. Sent by President Calvin Coolidge to mediate in a Nicaraguan civil war, Stimson negotiated a cease-fire and free elections. He was hailed as a peacemaker. But a Nicaraguan general named Sandino refused to accept the elections. Violence flared again, Sandino was killed and the Somoza family imposed a long dictatorship. Frustrated, Stimson later wrote that the people of Central America "were not fitted for popular self-government." The United States turned away while problems festered.

In 1989 I worked with Secretary of State James Baker to negotiate with Congress the Bipartisan Accord for Central America, which closed a divisive domestic debate. The accord supported a regional peace plan for democratic elections and an end to outside support for revolutionary guerrilla armies. Over the past two decades, the people of the region have struggled, and many have died, because they believed that democracy would bring not only peace but also a better life for themselves and their children. Now Central Americans are asking the United States to help secure democracy through a free-trade agreement known as CAFTA, building a closer economic relationship to provide a new foundation for growing opportunity.

Yet in the United States, some still say Central America and the Dominican Republic are "not fitted" for a free-trade agreement. As in Stimson's time, we again run the risk of turning our backs on Central America while the enemies of reform suggest an ominous future.

Central Americans and Dominicans have established young but fragile democracies; they speak of freedom and hope. Yet our own debate is absorbed with minuscule amounts of sugar and protectionist union demands. We hear false claims that domestic sugar production will be destroyed by imports that amount to two packets of sugar per American per week. Others claim to be concerned about workers' rights in the region yet seem to ignore the devastation for those workers that would result from defeating CAFTA and sending jobs in apparel production and similar industries to China.

The strategic choice on CAFTA should not be hard. The agreement is the logical culmination of 20 years of democratic and social progress in Central America, encouraged by the United States.

As the elected presidents of Central America and the Dominican Republic explained when they visited 11 U.S. cities before coming to Washington this month, CAFTA will strengthen democracy by promoting growth and cutting poverty, creating equality of opportunity, reducing corruption and strengthening the role of civil society. These leaders

realize that when a middle class develops and people have a larger economic stake in their society, they demand more of a say in how that society is run.

In Nicaragua and Guatemala, leaders who took over from corrupt predecessors want CAFTA to cement their push for more transparent societies based on rules, not privileged relationships. In El Salvador, Honduras and the Dominican Republic, CAFTA is seen as a cornerstone of broader development strategies. And throughout the region, CAFTA will promote equality of opportunity in economies long dominated by economic elites and powerful families.

While CAFTA is the right thing to do for democracy, it is also the smart thing to do for U.S. security. We do not live in isolation from what happens in Central America. Criminal gangs, trafficking in drugs, even trafficking in persons, create dangerous transnational networks. When there is instability and poverty in our neighborhood, it is common sense to help our neighbors address those problems at home rather than import them into our own country.

If CAFTA is voted down, the region's poor will not improve their lot; instead, a door to upward mobility will be slammed shut. If CAFTA is defeated, it will not be replaced by some mythical "perfect" agreement that incorporates every opponent's wish list; rather, Central Americans will be at a permanent disadvantage. If CAFTA stumbles, labor rights in Central America will not be strengthened; instead, competition for work will be more desperate, worsening conditions for unions and workers.

We have seen remarkable progress in Central America, a region that was wracked by civil war not long ago. But at root, the debate on CAFTA is about America's role in the world. We must decide whether we will sacrifice the strategic interests of the United States and the future of Central America for a spoonful of sugar. We must decide whether we will leave hundreds of thousands of Central Americans in poverty and helplessness because of the shortsighted protectionism of U.S. labor unions. We must decide whether to promote America's strategic interests or its special interests. The world is watching.

*The writer is deputy secretary of state and a former U.S. trade representative.*